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# Spiritual Leaders and Political Resisters: The Confessional Church in Nazi Germany

Heidi Johanna Klarhorst  
*Ouachita Baptist University*

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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

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The Confessional Church in Nazi Germany”**

written by

**Heidi Johanna Klarhorst**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for completion of the  
Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

thesis director

second reader

third reader

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April 15, 2001

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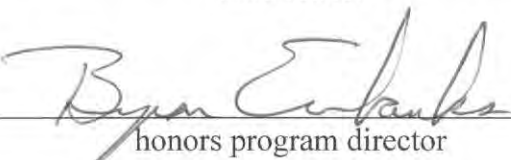
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The Confessional Church in Nazi Germany

Heidi Johanna Klarhorst

Honors Thesis

Dr. Terry Carter, Thesis Director

Dr. Wayne Bowen, Second Reader

Dr. Tom Greer, Third Reader

Dr. Byron Eubanks, Honors Program Director

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## INTRODUCTION

As the Weimar Republic deteriorated and Adolf Hitler rose in popularity, individual church leaders, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, began to worry. Others, like Martin Niemöller, rejoiced at first, thinking that Hitler could restore Germany to its former glory, but changed their opinions and denounced Hitler's government when the Nazis attacked the churches. What motivated those two men and others to stand up for what they believed, and what obstacles did they overcome in order to be heard? To fully understand their story and the story of the Confessional Church in Nazi Germany, it is necessary to look at some of the history of Germany.

After Germany had to accept defeat in World War I and sign the Versailles Treaty, including provisions that declared Germany responsible for beginning the war, the political situation was unstable. The Weimar Republic, which officially began on November 9, 1918, was based on a new constitution which confirmed Germany's transition from monarchy to democracy. This fledgling democracy had to deal with the consequences of a lost war--the reparation payments, the loss in prestige and a reduced army that was virtually incapacitated (Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross* 30-31).

The economic situation was difficult after the war; with massive unemployment and industrial dislocation, causing Germany to default on its reparation payments. The French occupation of the industrial Rhineland in 1923, began to exact reparations, caused the economy to collapse completely, with inflation robbing people of their savings and causing hardship for many. The situation did not improve much until 1925-1929 when, for a brief period, it finally seemed as if life was returning to normal. But this trend was short lived as the Great Depression hit Germany with tremendous force in 1930. As hundreds of thousands of Germans lost their jobs and there was no hope to be found anywhere, the people grew desperate (Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross* 31-33).

During this time Adolf Hitler, an Austrian born in 1889, had actively sought to gain political control. In 1923 he launched an uprising to take charge of the Bavarian state government in Southern Germany with hopes of marching on Berlin, but his revolution failed. His prison sentence convinced him to pursue legal avenues to power. His message in the later 1920s and early 1930s was that Germany could be revived stronger than ever, and that the Treaty of

Versailles was an immoral document. When elections were held in 1932, Hitler's party became the largest in the Reichstag, but still lacked a majority. Less than one year later, in January 1933, Hitler was appointed chancellor. From this position, he manipulated the Reichstag to gain a majority for his and other rightwing parties (Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross* 33).

After February 27, 1933, the Reichstag building in Berlin burned. Göring, the Prussian Minister of the Interior, blamed the German communist party for hiring a Dutchman, Marinus van der Lubbe, to commit arson, and ordered the arrests of many Jews and communists in conjunction with the fire (*Chronik* 1933 2). Although Hitler's party was not responsible for the incident, Hitler pressured President von Hindenburg to bypass Parliament and "sign a decree [. . .] that suspended individual liberties" (Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross* 33). By using illegal means, Hitler finally reached a two-thirds majority, allowing him to amend the constitution, transferring all legislative power to himself and proclaiming the *NSDAP* the only legal party in the country by July 1933. When President von Hindenburg died on August 2, 1934, Hitler proclaimed himself President and Chancellor, calling himself *Der Führer*. Free from the slow-moving processes of a democracy, Hitler moved ahead to improve the country. The economy which had begun to pick up momentum in 1932 continued to strengthen under his leadership, restoring the Germans' faith in themselves and in their country, even though he stabilized the economy through primarily inflationary means. He improved the infrastructure nationwide, renewed conscription and, most importantly, marched his troops into the French occupied Ruhr area and took it away from them, thus obliterating the Treaty of Versailles and erasing the humiliation suffered over a decade earlier (Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross* 33-34, 17).

The situation of the German Church was just as troubling as the political and economic situation during the Weimar Republic--with one exception. After the war, small theological brotherhoods formed throughout Germany. Their membership consisted predominantly of pastors and theologians whose main purpose was prayer, meditation, scholarly work and exchange of ideas (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 8). Their theology was based on Christ, unlike the dominant theology in Germany characterized by liberal thinking and higher criticism.

Representative of the latter kind of thinking was Ludwig Feuerbach, a theologian who argued that "man is God" (Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross* 29). Elevating man and oppressing God's unique character and holiness became the tenor of the day. The Church was furthermore very fragmented.

Although many had dreamed of unifying the Church since 1848, it had never been achieved, and the Church in its structure was allowed to stand unchanged for over a century. There was little cooperation beyond the regional level. The twenty-eight *Landeskirchen* (regional Protestant churches) were only loosely connected with each other or the rest of the churches (Stegmann, *Der Kirchenkampf in der Thüringer Evangelischen Kirche 1933-1945* 17). Influenced by Hegelian philosophy that denied the deity of Christ and rejected the Old Testament because of its Jewish context, and influenced by Nietzsche who had said God was dead, the German Church was weak and unprepared for the battle it had to fight (Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross* 26-44). Had there been a stronger, Christ-centered theology, as well as a stronger open dialogue between the churches, the German Church would have been better equipped to face the challenging times ahead.

For some *Landeskirchen*, the struggle began earlier than for others, when church elections in 1932 saw major Nazi involvement. Not only did the Nazi leadership encourage people to nominate members of the National Socialists, "but also to approve of those suggestions only if it could be guaranteed that after the elections two thirds of those voted into clerical positions would be Nazis" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenrenden Kirche* 26). The objective of the Nazis was to eradicate those liberal tendencies that had led to pacifism and a global Christian worldview. Those people who accepted these beliefs and joined the Nazi supported churches were known as *Deutsche Christen* and will be referred to from here on as German Christians--a term that was coined by Hitler himself (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenrenden Kirche* 26-27). Doris Bergen would probably consider Niemöller's definition of the German Christians as too simple. She points out in her book *Twisted Cross* that die-hard Nazis like "Martin Bormann and Heinrich Himmler, as well as Adolf Hitler himself, considered Nazism and Christianity irreconcilable antagonists " (Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 1). Furthermore, she points out that the German Christians were neither a unified front nor well-liked by the National



Socialists (Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 2, 7). Bergen agrees though that the German Christians were the "main rival" (Doris Bergen, *Twisted Cross* 12) of the Confessional Church.

### THE GERMAN AND CONFESSIONAL CHURCHES IN 1933

Whereas trouble, caused by the Nazi takeover, in 1932 was still limited, the year 1933 marked the beginning of serious problems for Germany in general and the Church in particular. After becoming Chancellor at the end of January, Hitler moved fast to consolidate his power. In March he issued new decrees, which effectively neutralized democracy in Germany, curtailing freedom of speech and freedom of the press. He also legalized the confiscations of property and house searches, and, in addition, prohibited people from meeting freely (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 46). The *Ermächtigungsgesetz* (Enabling Act) gave Hitler and his party unlimited powers and the first "brutal attacks" against communists, Jews, union members and Social Democrats followed (Stegmann, *Der Kirchenkampf in der Thüringer Evangelischen Kirche 1933-1945* 14). In April an appeal went to the people to boycott Jewish stores, and the *Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums*--an anti-Jewish law to restore civil service with tenure that forced Jews to resign from positions in the civil service (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 47)--was implemented. In late July Hitler reached a concordat, an agreement between the Pope and the German government for the regulation of church affairs with the Vatican (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 130), legitimizing his rule.

The changes in the political realm affected the church tremendously. Although Protestants and Catholics alike tried to address government issues, both groups fought separate battles. On March 23, 1933, Hitler had promised during a speech in Parliament that "the national government sees both of the Christian confessions as the most important factors for the preservation of our national traditions" and that "the rights of the churches would not be reduced, [and that] their positions toward the nation would not be changed" (W. Niemöller, *Kirchenkampf im Dritten Reich* 4).

Even though Hitler's words sounded hopeful, one man had already begun to question the integrity of the new political leader. Dietrich Bonhoeffer questioned the motives of the

government as soon as the Aryan-paragraph, which called for a boycott of Jewish businesses, had been published on April 7. Going beyond addressing the new directive as it applied to the church, he questioned it as it applied to the state as well. He wrote an essay, entitled "*Die Kirche vor der Judenfrage*," (The Church and the Jewish Question) in which he not only discussed "the question of church membership of Jews, but also their human rights in the German state" (Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 47). He was about the only one to address both issues, since the Confessional Church later only addressed the former and not the latter issue (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 47). Bonhoeffer always hoped to get the churches to begin acting and doing something, but few leaders were ready to challenge Hitler. When a new church constitution was passed on July 14, 1933, it seemed to validate Hitler's speech from March 23. It began with the words, "The inviolable basis of the German evangelical church is the Gospel of Jesus Christ . . ." (W. Niemöller, *Kirchenkampf im Dritten Reich* 4). Unfortunately, events had already taken place that gave those words a hollow ring.

Toward the end of May, Pastor Friedrich von Bodelschwingh was appointed Reichsbishop. He was well-known as a man of God who had followed in his father's footsteps as a pastor and as the leader of an institution for disabled people, especially epileptics. Von Bodelschwingh accepted his new position quite aware of the difficult task ahead of him in trying to reform and unify the Protestant Church on a national level. Upon taking office, he received letters of support from individuals as well as groups; however, the Nazis were not willing to accept his leadership. Their candidate for that position had been Ludwig Müller, a confidant of Hitler in church affairs. To ensure that Müller would become Reichsbishop, they fanned the flame of controversy in the churches and in public, using government control of newspapers to publish pro-Müller articles. An article in the *Soldiner Tagesblatt* (June 10th, 1933), for example, showed clearly how political one particular church had become, with references to groups within the *NSDAP* and the *SA* protesting against v. Bodelschwingh and supporting Müller (HA 2/39-5).

In addition to the continual bad publicity and controversy, people who had previously pledged their support to v. Bodelschwingh began withdrawing that support in light of the negative impact

the whole affair had on the unity of the churches. One pastor wrote to the Reichsbishop asking him to resign his position since "[Müller] is an old national socialist and has the absolute trust of Adolf Hitler" (HA 2/39-5, letter dated Tübingen, 8. June 1933). Another pastor expressed his hope that "the national socialistic movement should be won for the church, but that that could only work when they [the German Christians] could elect the Reichsbishop from among their own group, or if Hitler would show a vote of confidence [for v. Bodelschwingh]." The same pastor continued asking v. Bodelschwingh to contact Hitler and ask for his help, or to suggest Müller for the office himself (HA 2/39-5).

The Nazis continued their attempts to unseat v. Bodelschwingh by forcing influential church officials who supported the new Reichsbishop into silence. It is questionable what would have happened had v. Bodelschwingh stayed in office. His views were moderate and attracted many Germans who saw no fault with his ideas, but who also saw no fault with Hitler's ideas either. On one hand, this could have resulted in a larger grassroots movement unlike the Confessional Church which later emerged. On the other hand, it could have resulted in a large organization with weak, watered down theology for the Protestant Church. In any case, v. Bodelschwingh resigned in June when the General Superintendent in Prussia was removed from his office, the President of the *Kirche der Altpreuussischen Union* (Church of the Old Prussian Union) resigned (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 47), and when the appointment of *Staatskommissar* (State Commissioner) August Jäger caused a major collapse of his support. Jäger's appointment to office proved especially detrimental. According to Wilhelm Niemöller, "Jäger proceeded immediately to dissolve church representations and to appoint [Nazi] authorized representatives" (*Kirchenkampf im Dritten Reich* 5). To understand properly the impact of Jäger's appointment, a look at one of his written circular letters to the chief administrators and police presidents in Prussia will suffice. He justified the intervention of the state into operations of the churches by stating that "intervention was necessary because the confusing situation was about to threaten the nation's unity which Adolf Hitler had created" (HA2/39-44). Jäger continued:

... the state--in its own interest--cannot tolerate resistance of either church or nation, that such attempt at resistance is rather to be viewed as treason against the nation and the

state, [and that he therefore] requests that [they, the chief administrators and police presidents] pay particular attention that his orders as well as those of his official representatives will not be sabotaged. Such an attempt would have to be considered revolt and rebellion against the state's authority which had to be suppressed immediately. [ . . . ] It is for example not allowed that protests are published in local church bulletins, or that clerics are told [as had happened with their previous leadership] to voice protests in form of requests for prayers for the oppressed church. (HA 2/39-44)

When Jäger's appointment was discussed among Niemöller and his colleagues, Bonhoeffer suggested they refuse performing burials for as long as Jäger remained in office. However nobody thought such a strategy could be effective, and therefore it was not tried (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 48).

Within weeks after v. Bodelschwingh's resignation and Jäger's appointment, nationwide church elections were held in late July, and the German Christians received approximately 75% of all the votes. However, Müller did not become Reichsbishop until late September (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 131) because of his association with a radical pastor named Joachim Hossenfelder whose extreme views irritated many Christians (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 27). This forced leaders at the highest level of the German Christians to separate Müller from Hossenfelder's extreme views of the Church. But the rifts within the churches were already open and deepening. Pastors and church associations protested against being dissolved and demanded cooperation with v. Bodelschwingh. In order to heal those rifts, v. Bodelschwingh had stepped down, but the damage was done--not only among those churches who opposed the German Christians, but also among the German Christians themselves. Their supposed united movement split into different groups in varying in degrees of extremism (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 47).

The results of the elections caused mixed reactions among the German Christians, but especially among those opposed to the Nazi-supported church. One of the results was that the *Jungreformatoren* (Young Reformers) "withdrew from church politics" (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 131). Some people considered this group as a precursor to the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessional Church).

According to Wilhelm Niemöller, the *Jungreformatoren* was a group of people that had



gathered all those around them who opposed the German Christians. However, this group lacked theological soundness and determination to reject the new theology and the *Führer* idea. Martin Niemöller, head of administration for the *Jungreformatoren* at the time, composed sixteen theses which he read on August 2, during a meeting of the *Jungreformatoren* questioning the validity of the July elections (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 11). When the Prussian General Synod, dominated by the German Christians, changed statutes within the church without allowing the minority groups to voice their opinions, Martin Niemöller sent a letter to approximately three thousand pastors, almost all of them members of the *Jungreformatoren*. In his letter Niemöller addressed the issues raised by the synod and announced the establishment of an organization to help pastors stay true to the authority of scripture and Jesus Christ alone. Another result of the synod was that six general-superintendents were forced into retirement in Old Prussia, which caused tremendous confusion and tension among the churches in that part of the state (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 2-3).

When the German Christians held their synod, known as the Brown Synod, on September 5, 1933, it became obvious that those opposing them needed to unite more than ever before. During this particular synod the legal status of clerics was redefined. It was argued that only a man who was completely committed to the German Evangelical Church (with the German Christian style theology) and to the German nation could be called to become a pastor or priest. This same change in legal status called for those pastors who were non-Aryan--clerics and civil servants who were either non-Aryans themselves or married to a non-Aryan to be fired (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 12-13).

One day after the synod, Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer worked on a statement regarding the Aryan-paragraph. On September 11, sixty pastors signed what became known as the *Berliner Sätze* (Berlin Statements). The statements consisted of the Niemöller and Bonhoeffer's statement and the *Rheinisch-Westfälischen Sätzen* (Rhine-Westphalian Statements) which had been developed by two different brotherhoods (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 15). As already mentioned the brotherhoods were formed after World War I by pastors and

theologians who devoted themselves to prayer, meditation, scholarly work and exchange of ideas.

Over the course of the summer, while the v. Bodelschwingh controversy raged in the spotlight, brotherhoods in the regions of the Rhineland and Westphalia worked steadily in developing their theology. Thousands of copies of the *Berliner Sätze* were sent to pastors as early as September 12. On September 15, Martin Niemöller travelled to Bethel near Bielefeld to win Pastor v. Bodelschwingh's support for a new organization called the *Pfarrernotbund* (Pastors' Emergency Association, which some see as the nucleus of the Confessional Church. Although v. Bodelschwingh welcomed the new organization he refused to accept the leadership position (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 15-17).

Von Bodelschwingh was not the only one of the older generation in the church leadership who refused to join the new association. After v. Bodelschwingh's refusal, Martin Niemöller approached the Bishop of Hanover, Dr. August Marahrens, to offer him the leadership position, but Marahrens refused as well. Aware of what was at stake and realizing that leadership was needed immediately, Martin Niemöller, then forty-one years old, finally agreed to accept the responsibility of the leadership position. On September 19, Martin Niemöller asked pastors again to join the new association (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 16-18). By 1938 the Pastors Emergency Association would count 4,952 members, just over 20% of the number of active pastors (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund*, Preface).

On October 20, seven men, including Martin Niemöller, were chosen as members of the *Bruderrat* (Council of Brothers), with the authority to determine the association's general course of action as well as the authority to represent the group officially. An eighth member was added in early November. The *Bruderrat* shared equally in decision making, and Niemöller's vote did not bear any more weight than any one of the others. One of the reasons for their joint decision making was not only accountability, but also the desire to avoid the *Führer* principle which held Germany in its relentless grip (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 20-21).

Contact among the pastors in the association was kept by circular letters, which began on November 2, 1933, and ended on February 9, 1935. In the early letters, Martin Niemöller

requested input from pastors to help formulate a unified creed or profession of faith that would serve as guideline for pastors and ultimately would have the same weight as a pastor's ordination vows. Although one of the first versions was already developed in November of 1933, it would not be until after the Barmen Synod in 1934 that a version was agreed upon. Once the unified version was accepted, the *Rote Karte* (red card), as it became known, would be signed not only by pastors, but also by individual members of the congregations (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 22-27). The beginning of the Confessional Church is somewhat obscure, although it was intimately connected to the person of Martin Niemöller. Since it would not be until the Synod of Barmen that the groups working together would officially refer to themselves as the Confessional Church, this paper follows further events surrounding Niemöller's organization.

The Pastors' Emergency Association's membership rose to over seven thousand members within the first four months of its existence. Unfortunately, that number dropped steadily due to an inability of the different Protestant confessions to work persistently and productively together. Church politics only added to the difficulties rather than helped solve them (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 31). On September 27, the German Christians held their national synod at the town of Wittenberg during which Ludwig Müller was to be elected as Reichsbishop. Twenty-two men, among them Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemöller and Friedrich Müller, planned to voice their opinions. The latter, on behalf of two thousand pastors, wrote a statement addressed to the national synod. The document criticized the new regulations, the paganizing of the Gospel and the Aryan-paragraph among others. "None of the present church representatives felt courageous enough to read the statement aloud, therefore Fritz Müller and his friends nailed copies of the statement to trees and church doors" (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 32). Almost a month later, on November 11, three members of the Pastors' Emergency Association, including Martin Niemöller, were suspended until further notice by the *Berliner Konsistorium*. It would take five days before the three men could again continue their work in an official capacity (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 35).

A long-planned event took place in the *Sportpalast* (a sports arena) in Berlin on November 13.

The German Christians held a meeting for all the members demanding continued changes within the church and its theology. Among other things, they insisted on rejecting the Old Testament, judging it inferior in quality and morality to the New Testament, and refused Pauline theology regarding the sinfulness of mankind (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 38-39). Furthermore the German Christians demanded that the anti-Jewish laws, issued in April, should be enforced everywhere in the country (*Chronik* 1933 7).

Martin Niemöller reacted to the German Christians' demands in a letter to the Pastors' Emergency Association informing the ministers of the content of the meeting in Berlin and asking them to read a statement to their churches on November 19 at church services. Three of the pastors who complied with Niemöller's request were suspended. Their names were listed in another of Niemöller's circular letters with the request for intercessory prayer for these three pastors by name. This type of intercession would become the distinguishing mark of the Pastors' Emergency Association and later of the Confessional Church. It would be a mark of distinction that the Nazis would severely punish wherever they found it (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 42-43). Despite additional repeated meetings between members of the Pastors' Emergency Association with Reichsbishop Müller and Secretary of Church Affairs Weber nothing essentially changed, until finally on December 21, Joachim Hossenfelder resigned temporarily from his official duties within the German Christian Church (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 39-42).

Even though the German Christians tried to retain control with the help of the police who prohibited meetings and the distribution of leaflets, the month of December did not go well for them. On December 2, Müller introduced a new clerical department. The next day he was forced to cancel the festivities that should have accompanied his official acceptance of his new position as Reichsbishop. Over the next four weeks, he was dealt repeated blows as all four members of the new clerical department resigned their positions. Technically the church was again without legitimate leadership, but Müller remained in office. By mid-December he was not only facing opposition from the Pastors' Emergency Association, but also from those Lutheran bishops who were not German Christians, and who informed him on December 19 that in order to preserve the



unity of the German Evangelical Church, they could no longer consider his orders as authoritatively binding. One day later he received a letter from the Pastors' Emergency Association, now with a membership of six thousand pastors, expressing that its members no longer placed any confidence in the Reichsbishop's abilities to bring peace to the German Evangelical Church unless the clerical department's crisis could be resolved by December 23, and the problems within the church could be dealt with in a truly Christian manner (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 43-46). By the end of 1933, the lines between the German Christians and the Confessional Church were drawn. Nobody on either side expected a quick or easy end to the conflict.

#### THE GERMAN AND CONFESSIONAL CHURCHES IN 1934

The year 1934 began with a clear attempt by Reichsbishop Müller to silence any opposition to the German Christians, clearly revoking his action of the last month, when he was forced, on December 6, to publicly withdraw his support from them. His "decree regarding the reestablishment of order in the German Evangelical Church" was later referred to as "muzzling order" since it was a clear attempt to silence the pastors (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 47). Müller defended his decision with the statement that the rifts within the church endangered national unity as well as the spread of the Gospel. A closer look at the decree revealed though that its main focus was to silence organized opposition in the churches. Church services were now for preaching only. Church officials including deacons and pastors were neither allowed to become involved in church politics by passing out printed material nor to use church facilities for any type of meetings related to church politics. Violators would be penalized with immediate temporary suspension and salary cuts of at least one third. Finally, violators would be formally charged with legal infractions and, once judged guilty, would be permanently removed from their positions (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 47-48). It is obvious that the "muzzling order" was very effective in hindering pastors to connect with each other and their congregations regarding the situation of the church in general.

Martin Niemöller reacted immediately and wrote a statement which he passed on to the Association. Difficulties with the postal service resulted in a delay; as a result, many pastors read the statement in their churches on January 14 instead of January 7. One particular detail is worth mentioning. According to Niemöller, a meeting had taken place in Halle between several leaders of *Landeskirchen* on January 4. Those leaders who did not belong to the German Christians had come together to discuss how they could compel the Reichsbishop to keep promises he had made in previous weeks. Müller led the participants of the meeting to believe that a decision would be made soon. This message caused them to forgo any action until they heard from him again. On the same day he published his "muzzling order" (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 49-50).

Müller obviously played his cards well. By appealing to the undecided leaders in the Protestant church for patience, he silenced them effectively long enough to push through his agenda. With the same strike he not only silenced temporarily the leaders, but also those people the leaders represented, causing an attitude of cautious waiting. Persecution increased in mid-January, but thousands of pastors had read the statement. Although not all of them could be suspended and tried, many pastors everywhere were indeed dealt with in that manner (W. Niemöller, *Dr Pfarrernotbund* 50-51).

The Pastors' Emergency Association was increasingly monitored for political activity by the Gestapo. Officials in the government hoped that Niemöller and his friends would lose support among the population and tried to defame them and their organization. One of the reasons the government was interested in the group's supposed political activity was an upcoming meeting with Hitler and prominent leaders of the church. Naturally the Secret Police were most interested in information that could be distorted to the government's advantage (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 51-53). As it turned out later, tapping phone lines of members of the Pastors' Emergency Association, especially of Martin Niemöller, was also ordered (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 88).

Herman Göring, "Prussian Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Prussian Police and Gestapo" (*Göring, Hermann* 1), used part of the gathered information to "set up a stage worthy

performance," at least according to Wilhelm Niemöller, who called the meeting with Hitler a disaster for the Confessional Church (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 53). In his book, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenrenden Kirche*, Niemöller gives more particulars about the incident. Several men representing different groups attended the meeting. Hitler, Göring, and the Minister for the Interior, Frick, represented the government. Several German Christian bishops of the *Landeskirchen*; several *Reichsleiter*, and finally members of what was still growing into the Confessional Church were the other participants. The latter group included, among others, state bishop Marahrens who, as already mentioned, had refused to lead the Pastors' Emergency Association, state bishop Theophil Wurm, and Martin Niemöller (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenrenden Kirche* 88).

When Niemöller addressed Hitler, he pointed out that he was solely interested in "the welfare of the church, the state, and the German people" (Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross* 130). Hitler's comment to Niemöller's statement was "You confine yourself to the Church. I'll take care of the German people" (Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross* 131). Niemöller addressed Hitler one more time when taking leave saying: "You said that 'I will take care of the German people.' But we too, as Christians and churchmen, have a responsibility toward the German people. That responsibility was entrusted to us by God, and neither you nor anyone in this world has the power to take it from us" (Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross* 131). This last comment obviously did not please Hitler at all and as a result Niemöller was repeatedly interrogated by Secret Police agents during the next few days, while Reichsbishop Müller began negotiations with the state bishops "promising them the appointment of a new clerical department, the separation of church and state, and to take a liberal approach toward interpreting the enforcement of the muzzling order" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenrenden Kirche* 89).

The result of that meeting came as a shock to Niemöller and the members of the Pastor Emergency Association. On October 27, it became public knowledge that those state bishops, who were neither active members of the German Christians nor members of the Pastors' Emergency Association, had crossed the lines and unanimously supported the Reichsbishop. The

German Christians enjoyed their victory and did their utmost to use it to their advantage in the media (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 89).

However, the German Christians had stretched the truth. The state bishops had only agreed to support the Reichsbishop, because they thought they could hold him to his promises, like the promise that the state bishops would be included more often in decision making and church politics. Unfortunately, they had only Müller's verbal promises, but nothing in writing (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 55). The state bishops "did not only declare their absolute loyalty to the Third Reich and its Führer," but they also "utterly condemned all active criticism of the state, nation . . ." (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 55). This move by the state bishops was very damaging indeed because it gave the public a negative impression of the Pastors' Emergency Association, seeing it more as a group of trouble-makers rather than as pastors fighting for the right to preach a pure, undiluted Gospel.

It appeared as if the month of January would end with a major victory for the German Christians and Reichsbishop Müller. On January 26, Müller in his function as Reichsbishop and as the Prussian state bishop, not only suspended Niemöller, but also issued a new decree intended to "secure the unified leadership of the evangelical church in the Prussian Union." By February 2, fifty pastors had been suspended based on violations of the "muzzling order." The secret police began infiltrating church services, arresting pastors, and according to W. Niemöller, this was the first time that pastors were sent to concentration camps. On February 3, Müller ordered that pastors could be reassigned to other churches without notice. Pastors were also denied the right to appeal those reassignments. Two days later, he dissolved several high-ranking offices within the Protestant church hierarchy (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 89-91).

While the German Christians and Reichsbishop Müller harrassed pastors, the Pastor Emergency Association faced a major crisis. Many blamed Niemöller for causing the final breach with Hitler. On January 29, the Council of Brothers of the Pastors' Emergency Association met to discuss the situation when Niemöller was arrested for further interrogation. Despite the arrest, the meeting continued, and the council realized that they could not give up, no matter how dire the



future seemed. Another meeting held two days later included not only council members, but also local church representatives. They decided to draft letters to the renegade state bishops in which they reproached the bishops and to Reichsbishop Müller in which the council members expressed their intent to keep fighting for the right to preach the true Gospel (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 56-58).

Even though the Council of Brothers and the chosen representatives of the local churches saw the need to continue with their resistance, it became obvious that it would be harder to do than ever before. Many pastors removed themselves from the membership roll of the Pastors' Emergency Association. Some no longer considered Niemöller as an appropriate representative of their views, and others felt that they had to obey their state bishops and follow the lead those men had taken on January 27. The Pastors' Emergency Association's membership dropped from over seven thousand to just over five thousand (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 58). A newspaper article dated February 10, announced the decision of the state bishops and hailed it as a triumph for the German Christians. Interestingly enough it misrepresented the facts when it stated that "the leaders of the Pastors' Emergency Association . . . renounce explicitly any further opposition against the Reichsbishop" (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 60). The article does not mention that the state bishops were only allies and not the officially elected leaders of the Pastors' Emergency Association.

Another event that had taken place on January 30 seemed to lend credibility to the newspaper's claim. The church leadership in the state of Württemberg had followed an invitation of the political police and came to an agreement which included dissolving the Pastors' Emergency Association in that state, as well as giving up the right to critique any decisions regarding the restructuring of the German Evangelical Church. State Bishop Wurm had never officially been a member of the Pastors' Emergency Association; therefore, he had no right to agree to dissolving it in his state. Yet, that particular detail was never mentioned in public. The members of the association in Württemberg were informed on February 2, that the "Pastors' Emergency Association dissolved itself on demand of the political police in order to avoid being dissolved;

however, the association had not given up on its desire to do theological work renewing the church in accord with the Gospel" (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 65). The agreement did not become the victory the German Christians had claimed, even though it did do some damage. By March 13, State Bishop Wurm changed his opinion regarding the agreement (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 61-66).

On March 17, Müller published the "Good Friday Message" which received a strong rebuke from the Westphalian Brotherhood. The brotherhood responded, on behalf of 500 Westphalian pastors, on April 5 with their message "Our word to the congregations," to the main points in Müller's attack (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 72). Müller had begun his message by calling "the pastors under the cross of Christ to examine themselves" (*Unser Wort an die Gemeinden* 2). The brotherhood condemned the fact that Müller chose the public media to spread his message, and that he made it sound as if the openness for dialogue was entirely on the Reichsbishop's side. Müller had asked for the Confessional Church to "bring its tongue as a sacrifice to Christ's cross and to refrain from defaming the eighth commandment" (*Unser Wort an die Gemeinden* 2). One of Müller's accusations, which hurt members of the Confessional Church the deepest, had been that they "wanted to be holier than the Lord himself" (*Unser Wort and die Gemeinden* 2). Despite laying blame for the church struggle solely at the Confessional Church's door, "Müller had claimed to have been pressured to offer amnesty," according to the Westphalian Brotherhood, a fact which surprised the Confessional Church, which asked in response "why they who serve responsibly in the church should ask for amnesty" (HA 2/39-69, fax 2). Obviously Müller had also blamed the National Socialists for the confusion in the church, because the Westphalian Brotherhood pointed out that it was the German Christians who continually caused problems in the church and not the government. Müller had ordered the pastors to keep focused on their own congregations, an order the Westphalian Brotherhood refused on grounds that it was impossible to care for one's local congregation when methods of the church leadership advanced the decay of congregations and not their growth. Finally, Müller had argued that confessing Christ was not at the center of the controversy but the necessity for order, to which the Westphalian Brotherhood

replied that confessing Christ was exactly what the church struggle was all about (*Unser Wort an die Gemeinden* 2-3).

The rebuttal of the Westphalian Brotherhood, which helped refortify the position of the Pastors' Emergency Association (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 72), as well as the position of the Confessional Church, was not the only visible support the weary pastors and members of both organizations received. Unexpected support from the international church community encouraged the Pastor's Emergency Association. The link between the Association and the international community was predominantly Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In July of 1931, Bonhoeffer had met Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian whose work he had first encountered in 1924 (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 27, 34). In September of 1931, Bonhoeffer represented Germany during the "'World Alliance' conference in Cambridge," England where he was appointed as "one of three secretaries for ecumenical work among the youth, responsible for mid and northern Europe" (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 35). In the course of working for the World Alliance he met "George Bell, the bishop of Chichester, [and] at that time president of Life and Work," another international group devoted to ecumenical work (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 6). Both men became close friends in the following years, and World Alliance as well as Life and Work would later publicly support the Confessional Church (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 36). In March of 1934, Bell "wrote a letter to the publisher of the "'Times'" informing the British public of the problems in the German Protestant Church and that despite claims of the German government these problems had caused tension with the international evangelical community (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 75). A declaration of solidarity signed by 610 Swiss pastors and theologians helped boost the confidence of Niemöller and his friends encouraging them to continue in new ways to reach their goals (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 75).

The man most associated with developing strategies to reach these goals was Karl Immer, a pastor in the city of Barmen. He had encouraged members of the Pastors' Emergency Association to establish synods throughout the country. One of the more important major synods had already taken place in mid-February 1934 in Barmen (Rhineland). When the Council of Brothers of the

Pastors' Emergency Association heard a report of the meeting by one of its attendees, it requested to be accepted into the ranks of the synod. More synods followed, ultimately culminating in the Synod of Barmen, which met from May 29 to 31 (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 76-80). One more synod needs to be mentioned before turning the attention to Barmen. The Old Prussian Union, which was totally opposed to the German Christians, and which had been on the frontlines ever since the conflict had begun in the churches, held their synod on May 20, during which a proposal for the organization of the future Confessional Church was made (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenrenden Kirche* 123). It appears as if some aspects of the proposal were later incorporated in the developing structure of the Confessional Church.

Nine days later "126 representatives of 18 *Landeskirchen*" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenrenden Kirche* 123), met in Barmen where they were called to repent, to gather under the word of God, and most importantly to remember "the glory and uniqueness, as well as the honor and the power of God's word" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenrenden Kirche* 123). The synod concluded with several decisions and statements. First, the attendees decided to establish a Council of Brothers representing all groups present including Lutherans and the Reformed Church. Some names of the chosen members of the Council of Brothers were familiar: Martin Niemöller, Hans Asmussen, Karl Immer, and Gerhard Jacobi, among others. Second, the synod categorically rejected Reichsbishop Müller and his colleagues declaring:

We deny that the current clerical regime of the German Evangelical Church has any legal authority to reform the [church] constitution. Instead, we demand explicitly that it honors the existing constitution. We declare that as long as the current clerical regime exists, we, the Confessional Church, will fundamentally refuse any negotiations of questions regarding the constitution. (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenrenden Kirche* 123)

In order to justify such a claim, a lawyer, Dr. Eberhard Fiedler, gave a lecture entitled an "Explanation regarding the legal status of the confessional synod of the German Evangelical Church." Fiedler pointed out just why the current church leadership had no right to be in a leadership position (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenrenden Kirche* 123).

Even though clarification of the legal status was important, there was something more



important that happened in Barmen. The third statement was the theological declaration of Barmen which consisted of six basic tenets developed by Karl Barth. The first tenet affirmed, based on scripture, that Jesus Christ is the only revelation of God. The second tenet pointed to Jesus Christ as the only means of salvation and that there are no areas in a person's life that are excepted from the need of sanctification. The third tenet affirmed the role of the church in society and that its center should be Jesus Christ alone. The fourth tenet denied special powers to church leaders. The fifth tenet rejected the idea that the roles of church and state could be interchanged. And finally, the sixth tenet affirmed that the Gospel should spread freely and that God cannot be forced to act according to the will of human beings (*EKD: Glaube aktuell* 1-3). It can be argued that the Barmen declaration was very important to the development of the Confessional Church. In future years it would act like a plumb line against which other declarations, ideas and philosophies would be measured. Wilhelm Niemöller quotes Professor D. Arthur Cochrane of Dubuque, "It is my firm conviction that the Barmen Declaration is the most significant Church document that has appeared since Reformation Confessions and Catechismus of the 16th and 17th centuries . . . here speaks the voice of one, holy ecumenical church transcending national, racial and denominational barriers!" (*Westfälische Kirche im Kampf* 32). Unfortunately, the unity that Cochrane praises so highly would not last long.

The unity which signified the official birth of the Confessional Church is attributed to Pastor Hans Asmussen who introduced the theological declaration to the synod without political innuendo. No matter where the attendees stood regarding politics, Asmussen made sure that the declaration and its implications were understood within only theological parameters. Barth and Bonhoeffer would distance themselves from this non-political attitude later. According to Bethge, it is the main reason why Bonhoeffer would eventually choose to become involved in an unsuccessful conspiracy to stop Hitler (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 53). There were a few who considered their denominational differences too great to be reconciled and chose to disagree with the union of the denominations, but they were not numerous enough to threaten the sense of unity among the participants of the synod (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche*

126).

Many, unlike Barth and Bonhoeffer, were comfortable with the theological declaration, and "it did not take long before young theologians would use it as the basis of their commitment at the time of their ordination" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 127). A small group of Bavarian theologians tried to discredit the Barmen declaration, with an article published on June 11. In their opinion the six tenets were not Lutheran enough. They confirmed in their article that Hitler was a pious, genuine Christian worthy of their support. The publication did not dampen the spirit of those who had attended Barmen, but the German Christians tried to make the most of it in the media (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 131).

This minor attack was mild compared to what followed later. While the Confessional Church was growing, August Jäger, who had already caused problems in Prussia as the state's commissioner, had been appointed in April to more powerful offices extending his authority beyond Prussia's borders. His attempts to bring "peace and order" to the German Evangelical Church were ruthless and not at all peaceful (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 81).

Only a couple of weeks later, another attack was launched against the Pastors' Emergency Association, which continued to exist as a separate entity, though it was also part of the Confessional Church. The State Bishop of Nassau-Hessen outlawed the organization in that state. Members from everywhere in the country supported the harrassed pastors in Nassau-Hessen with letters of encouragement and the attempt to ban the group failed. However, some of the pastors caved in under the pressure and withdrew their membership. Further attacks by the state bishop followed, but were not successful except in only a few individual cases (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 82-88).

An additional widespread attack launched at the *Landeskirchen* was that almost all of them were "incorporated" (*gleichgeschaltet*) into one big group that was controlled by the German Christians. The attack began in early March and ended successfully in late July. Only the states of Württemberg, Hanover, and Bavaria could avoid the *Gleichschaltung*, which centralized the

administration of all the *Landeskirchen* in the country. The Council of Brothers of the Confessional Synod protested sharply, but without any success (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 89). When the next synod met in Dahlem, on October 20, it became obvious that times had gotten harder than ever before. According to a report published during the synod, 1,043 measures had been taken against pastors. These measures included disciplinary actions, suspensions, prohibition to preach, forced reassignments, forced retirement, suspension from higher clerical offices, reprimands, fines, and salary cuts among others (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 90-91).

The Pastors' Emergency Association kept a low profile during this time, according to a letter by Martin Niemöller. He pointed out in Circular Letter No. 17:

... the Council of Brothers in the individual confessional synods inform their members about the *status quo* and necessary tasks within the Confessional Church. The leadership of the Association is in close contact with the confessional synods. This practice proved sufficient and allowed the Association to concentrate on supporting members who had been disciplined. (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 91)

The Pastors' Emergency Association was fortunate that it had many friends among lawyers and court officials on local and state levels. With the help of these Christian men, the Association was able to help represent members in court successfully. Some of those men paid a heavy price. Dr. Hans Buttersack, a founding member of the Confessional Church in Nassau-Hessen who fought not only for the church, but who also represented Jews in court, was sent to the concentration camp in Dachau where he died. Dr. Hans Koch, who represented Martin Niemöller in court, was shot by the Secret Police without a valid court ruling (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 93-94).

The problems for the Confessional Church did not end. "A state of emergency was declared for the church" (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 131) by Reichsbishop Müller which gave him the right to interfere wherever he saw an emergency in the *Landeskirchen* (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 132). The participants of the Dahlem Synod, hosted by and exclusively attended by members of the Confessional Church, declared a state of emergency within the church itself based on the events during the last year and "the first article of the church constitution of

July 11, 1933" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 132). They outlined a new form of church government which proved impossible to work because it included a "weakness" in the filing system of official documents which created a loophole between the church's and government's bureaucracies allowing the opposition to turn the interpretation of the article in question in either direction (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 184-187).

On November 22 a provisional church leadership was established (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 191) which consisted of the Confessional Church and "the churches of Bavaria, Württemberg, and Hanover" (*Britannica.com* 1), and which "should seek support from the government and demand recognition of its authority and representation of the German Evangelical Church for only a limited period of time" (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 95). At that time the German Christians were firmly in control of the government-favoring "German Evangelical Church, a federation formed in 1933 of Lutheran, Reformed, and United territorial churches" (*Britannica.com* 1). It is questionable how this new leadership tried to gain recognition from a political and clerical government that had proven so hostile in the past. Instead of furthering the cause for the unification of the church and solving differences, it added to the problems.

One result of that decision of forming the new provisional leadership, consisting of members of the Confessional Church and representatives of the *Landeskirchen* of Bavaria, Hanover and Württemberg, was that Hermann Albert Hesse, Karl Immer, and Martin Niemöller resigned from the *Reichsbruderrat* (a newly founded council made up of six members of the council of the German Evangelical Church). That decision increased the difference between those around Martin Niemöller, the radical *Dahlemites* and the more moderate members of the Confessional Church. Now Niemöller, Hans Asmussen, Friedrich Müller were synonymous with the words "radical," "persevering," and "uncompromising" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 189). The provisional leadership crumbled after just one year because of its inability to refrain from compromising the goals set during the Dahlem synod (W. Niemöller, *Der*



*Pfarrernotbund* 95). It is of interest to note that Dahlem was in that region of the country that was under the control of the Old Prussian Union which had been from the beginning a very strong fighter against the German Christians. One cannot help but wonder if Martin Niemöller could have thrived and been able to be as radical if he had been in a region that was relatively weak in its fight against the new church government.

As if the internal troubles within the Confessional Church were not enough, the government added a new measure to ensure more problems in the future for the Confessional Church and any organization or individual who did not agree with the current political leadership. When Hitler and his staff issued the *Heimtücke-gesetz* (Treachery Law) on December 20, they effectively increased their control and power to silence people who were opposed to their leadership. The wording of the law was rather ambiguous and allowed for a wide range of interpretation. It basically meant that a person who made derogatory comments about the government and its officials, as well as the NSDAP party itself and its associated organizations, could be either fined or sent to jail. If a person committed a crime wearing a uniform or insignia of the NSDAP they could be punished with at least six months in prison. If the deed was committed with the intention of causing a riot, inducing fear in the population, or, even worse, giving the Third Reich negative international media attention, the individual could be sentenced to anywhere from three years to life in prison. Severe cases could result in the death penalty (*Heimtücke-gesetz* 11/07/01). Personal opinions opposing the government were considered equal to treason against the state and the German nation, upsetting many pastors as their patriotism was questioned when they refused to support the Nazis.

The end of 1934 brought good and bad news. Martin Niemöller was reinstated as pastor of his church in Berlin-Dahlem at the beginning of December (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 97), but Karl Barth, the main author of the Barmen Declaration, was suspended from his teaching position and forced into retirement, just like many other university professors before him. Barth returned to his native Switzerland trying to support the cause of the Confessional Church from the city of Basel (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenntnenden Kirche* 229-231). His help

would later result in controversy that did not really help the Confessional Church and would taint his contributions to the Barmen Declaration in the eyes of many.

### THE GERMAN AND CONFESSIONAL CHURCHES IN 1935-38

At the beginning of 1935, Martin Niemöller and members of the Pastors' Emergency Association still kept a low profile, using the time to regroup and rethink their position. It was decided that pastors who were associated with the Confessional Church had to join the Pastors' Emergency Association in order to be eligible for financial help by the association. In turn, members of the Pastors' Emergency Association were asked to do everything possible to further the cause of the Confessional Church in their local churches (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 97).

The situation around the Confessional Church became tense again in early March when the Old Prussian Union held their second synod in Dahlem. The participants' message was very direct.

We see our nation (*Volk*) threatened by a deadly danger. The danger is a new religion. The church has the order of its Lord to watch that our nation (*Volk*) gives Christ the honor which is due him as the judge of the world. The church knows that it will be held accountable by God, if [the church] allowed the nation (*Volk*) to turn its back on Christ without warning. (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 98)

This message was read by many pastors across the nation, despite the fact that those suspected or known to be members of the Pastors' Emergency Association were visited by the *Gestapo* to inform them that the message was not to be read in public. Seven hundred and fifteen pastors, including Martin Niemöller and Gerhard Jacobi, were arrested after disregarding the *Gestapo*'s warning. The pastors in the Rhineland and Westphalia provinces decided to delay their reading of the message and therefore eluded the *Gestapo*. The most disconcerting fact about this incident in March 1935 was not so much the number of arrests, but rather the fact that the police and *Gestapo* and no longer the regional and national church authorities punished the pastors. Punishments for belligerent pastors were drastically increased and more severe than ever. Pastors were banned from speaking, ordered to leave their churches, arrested, or even deported to concentration camps. Because of their plight, churches nationwide began to hold special prayer

services for pastors and prayed for them by name (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 98-99).

The Confessional Church did not limit its efforts to prayer alone. In late May representatives of regional churches met in Bad Oeynhausen to identify problems within the churches and to discuss strategies for solving those problems. The Confessional Church held their third synod at Augsburg from June 4-6. Since problems with the areas of responsibilities between the provisional church leadership and the *Reichsbruderrat* had been solved in mid-May, Martin Niemöller, Karl Immer and Hermann Albert Hesse had rejoined the council and were listed as three of the 120 participants. Although the synod addressed issues like training new pastors and assignment of areas of responsibilities of the provisional church leadership and the *Reichsbruderrat*, it failed to address the measures the government had taken against the churches (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 100, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 233-235). It is questionable why the participants avoided the topic of government persecution. Perhaps they considered the topics they did discuss as more under their control and probable to solve than the issue concerning the government.

In July it became obvious for Martin Niemöller that the provisional church leadership was failing. Inviting more than 50 members of the Pastors' Emergency Association, he voiced what all of them felt: "We are in a state of confusion and harmlessness. We need clear directions to avoid turning in a dangerous direction" (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 101). Bonhoeffer who had come from Finkenwalde, where he led one of the first seminaries founded by the Confessional Church, was especially critical about the fact that the synod at Augsburg had not addressed the Aryan paragraph and other recent political decisions. The meeting ended with the writing of a letter to all pastors reminding them of the demands made in Barmen and Dahlem (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 102).

The *Reichsbruderrat* (National Council of Brothers) of the Pastors' Emergency Association met in August discussing strategies to re-organize the church on both national and local levels. They hoped restructuring would bring order to the chaotic church landscape. The members of the *Reichsbruderrat* agreed that the Pastors' Emergency Association should become a brotherhood for

all pastors of the Confessional Church, which meant the latter needed to officially join the former. Many in the provisional church leadership considered the Pastors' Emergency Association too dangerous because of its association with Martin Niemöller; therefore, the suggestions of the *Reichsbruderrat* went untested (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 105-106).

In October the church's landscape changed again. Two committees were established, one for the national level and one for the regional level of the *Landeskirchen*. The members affirmed National Socialistic ideas and did not address the declarations of Barmen and Dahlem. Moderate Christians expected these committees to solve the problems in the church and to bring order. Even some members of the Pastors' Emergency Association held such a conviction and withdrew their financial support from the organization--a financial support that was needed more than ever to help those pastors who had been suspended, fined or jailed for being a member of the Pastor's Emergency Association (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 106-107).

The year 1936 began with squabbles centering on the new church committees. Squabbling over doctrinal issues and threatened by old fears of regionalism, the Confessional Church began to fall apart (Shelley Baranowski, *Betrayal* 98) which became very obvious during the fourth synod of the German Evangelical Church hosted by the Confessional Church, which took place in Bad Oeynhausen in mid-February: Neither group attending was willing to come together and make a concerted effort to become a unified body. Each group insisted on "going about their business in their own way" (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 108), resulting in a fragmentation of the Confessional Church that robbed it of its strength. Eventually the tension within the Confessional Church would also reach the Pastors' Emergency Association and add to the burden the organization already carried (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 108). The Provisional Church Leadership, associated with the Confessional Church, obviously failed during this time completely, since Bethge points out that a second Provisional Church Leadership was established in February (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 133).

Many *Landeskirchen* faced severe problems during 1936. Attempts to limit the rights of state bishops to the realm of "preaching and official duties" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der*



*Bekennenden Kirche* 352) failed. The regional committee in Nassau-Hessen, for example, had been established for the fourth time, and each time it was obvious that the members appointed were considered appropriate choices by the government rather than by individual pastors. The Confessional Church in Pommern faced complete destruction by the regional committee; the same was true for the churches in Silesia and Westphalia. During the Silesian synod in Naumburg which took place from July 1-4, participants argued over who had ultimate authority in the church. They agreed on the following which ended their declaration: "Only the church has the order to separate true and false doctrine.--Only the church is supposed to watch and decide about its organization and its offices.--Only the church has the authority to call appropriate church members to serve in those offices" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 357). The Naumburg declaration followed the general outline of its predecessors of Barmen and Dahlem; however, most of the German Christians and church members involved could not handle its implication and were therefore very upset to be reminded that the problem of the German Protestant Church had not been solved yet (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 357).

By the end of April the Prussian *Bruderrat*, associated with the Confessional Church, planned a "visitation program" lasting from May to June in order to strengthen the unity among individual churches in those provinces and regions that had the most problems. Each time two members of the Old Prussian Union conducted a visitation, they focused their attention on updating the local church members on the current status of the church struggle while gathering information on the condition of the local confessional churches. From the gathered information it became more and more obvious that the church committees had dealt the Confessional Church a crippling blow in all visited regions (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 360-362).

The attempts to solve the problems within the Protestant churches lasted into the next year. An announcement on February 15, 1937, promising new church elections for later in the year caused the different factions within the Protestant Church to renew their ties, while "the Provisional Church Leadership [associated with the Confessional Church] and the Council of Germany's Protestant-Lutheran Church decided to join forces" and appointed members of both

groups to represent the newly formed group, called Leadership of the German Evangelical Church (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 408-409).

However, the joint efforts of cooperation among the different church groups did not last long, since the announced elections never took place. Obviously not everybody had been eager to cooperate. The chairmen of the national church committees and non-German-Christian bishops met at a conference without inviting either the Prussian *Bruderrat* or the Provisional Church Leadership which were both closely linked to the Confessional Church, and set up a new church government. The Prussian *Bruderrat*, speaking for the Confessional Church, denied the new church leadership any legitimacy. The church committees collapsed one after another, in early 1937, as German Christians abandoned the committees like sinking ships when the news was published that the Prussian *Bruderrat*, associated with the Confessional Church, had made a deal with the government sponsored, regional church committee of Prussia which gave the Prussian *Bruderrat* a legal voice in Prussia's church affairs (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 408-409).

The fact that the non-German-Christian bishops agreed to set up a new church government shows how confusing and fragmented the entire Protestant church landscape was at that time. Neither group that vied for control or at least for their voice to be heard was able to gain a majority. Cooperative efforts crumbled as soon as they were made, and most of the new offices that were intended to improve church government failed miserably.

It is interesting to note that it was the Prussian *Bruderrat* and not the national *Bruderrat* that made the deal with the Prussian church committee. The reason, according to Wilhelm Niemöller, was very simple. The national *Bruderrat* had fallen apart after one final stand on June 23 when the council met and decided to call on Protestant Christians not to attend the upcoming church elections. Eight members of the national *Bruderrat* were arrested by the secret police when the latter broke up the meeting (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 115).

Despite the victory the Prussian *Bruderrat* gained through its deal with the government sponsored Prussian church committee, its members could not enjoy the fruits of their labor for

long. The police arrested Martin Niemöller on July 1, 1937, thus dealing a crippling blow to the *Bruderrat*, the Pastors' Emergency Association, the *Bruderrat* of the Old Prussian Union and the Council of the German Protestant Church--groups which listed Niemöller as one of their members. While many raised their voices coming to Niemöller's defense, one voice remained silent, and nothing could induce the representatives of the Lutheran churches to raise their voice for Niemöller's case (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 116-117).

Five days after Niemöller was incarcerated in the Moabit prison in Berlin, a clerical committee was founded in Kassel. The different factions were the "conference of bishops, the Provisional Church Leadership of the Confessional Church as well as the churches of the states of Bavaria, Hanover, and Würtemberg, and the Council of Germany's Protestant-Lutheran Church" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenntenden Kirche* 409). Their decision to cooperate was a major breakthrough in the struggle to unite the Protestant church. Their message to the churches in the whole country, written on August 20, spoke clearly of the disastrous situation of the church and cited all the government's attacks that made the pastors' job to proclaim the Gospel almost impossible. Despite its inflammatory content, the message was printed and distributed without alerting government officials. However, this lapse of reaction by the government could not cover up the fact that the Confessional Church was losing ground (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenntenden Kirche* 409).

One of the heaviest losses the Confessional Church suffered during this time was the loss of Karl Immer who had a stroke in prison. Even though he recovered somewhat, his strength was minimal through the final few years of his life. Yet he remained influential and was hated by the government for one particular letter he wrote to his children (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenntenden Kirche* 413). According to Wilhelm Niemöller, "no other document of the Confessional Church was as sought after" as the 'sunbeam-letter' in which Immer "told his children about his experiences in prison" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekenntenden Kirche* 413). "Whoever was distantly involved with the copying and distribution of that letter was arrested, threatened, interrogated and put under pressure" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der*

*Bekennenden Kirche* 413).

The loss of leading men like Martin Niemöller and Karl Immer was not the only problem the Confessional Church dealt with in the summer of 1937. More problems became known soon enough at the Prussian Confessional Synod in Lippstadt where participants in late August heard a whole litany of government restrictions that affected the church negatively (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 409). In September Himmler announced that any pastor's training done at Confessional Church institutions was illegal (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 133), a decision that denied young trainees the opportunity to learn a Gospel untainted by German Christian theology. One of the results was that the police shut down the seminary in Finkenwalde, where Dietrich Bonhoeffer had been teaching for a little over two years. However, work continued in the underground until 1940, when it was discovered and shut down for a second time. By that time many of its students had already been conscripted. Many of them died in the war and did not return (Renate Bethge, *Wunderbar geborgen: Dietrich Bonhoeffer* 24).

Following the increased restrictions and persecution by the government, the Pastors' Emergency Association spent the rest of 1937 restructuring the organization, especially since one of the main leaders, Martin Niemöller, remained in prison for the rest of the year. One of the major changes was the decision to stop managing the finances and funds of the organization from Berlin. When Niemöller had been arrested, the police confiscated not only his personal money but also money belonging to the organization. Since it was a considerable sum, the financial structure of the Pastors' Emergency Association was decentralized, giving authority to the provincial leaders (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 119-124).

The next major event in the history of the Pastors' Emergency Association, which also impacted the Confessional Church, began on February 7, 1938. Martin Niemöller's trial began and lasted for nineteen days. At the end he was punished with seven months in prison and several fines. Since he had already spent time in prison, the only thing to do for him was to pay the fines--at least that was the court's verdict. In reality, Niemöller was taken to the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen by the *Gestapo* on March 2, where he was imprisoned until July 11, 1941 when he



was sent to the concentration camp in Dachau, remaining there until the end of the war.

While Martin Niemöller was removed permanently from the church struggle, the fight against the German Christians and the government's intrusion in church affairs continued. Pastors of the Confessional Church were not allowed to travel or speak publicly--prohibitions which made it hard for them to tend to the needs of their congregations (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Bekenntnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 419).

At the occasion of the annexation of Austria, the *Reichskirchenregierung* (Reich church's government) presented Hitler with a very special birthday gift in April of 1938. Every pastor was ordered to swear an oath of loyalty to Hitler. In the beginning many pastors of the Confessional Church refused, but later gave in since they argued that the government could request such an oath. Interestingly enough it was argued later that neither the *NSDAP* nor the government was really concerned about the pastors giving that oath. Dietrich Bonhoeffer had advocated against the loyalty oath, yet his words had fallen on deaf ears (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 70).

As the summer passed and more and more pastors swore the loyalty oath, life for the Jews in Germany became even more difficult than it had been. In August they were ordered to have identification papers that marked them clearly as Jews, "an 'I'--Israel for men and an 'S'--Sarah for women" (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 70). This new law caused Bonhoeffer's twin sister and her Jewish husband to leave Germany immediately. While Dietrich Bonhoeffer helped his sister and her husband escape to England, Karl Barth surprised his friends among the Confessional Church with a letter he wrote to "Josef Hromádka, a theologian in Prague, Tschecheslowakia, calling for armed resistance against Hitler's forces" (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 70). The Provisional Church Leadership, as well as other leading members of the Confessional Church, decided that they had to distance themselves from Barth in order to protect themselves and their organizations (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 70). On September 27, the Provisional Church Leadership ordered a special prayer church service in which the church asked for prayer that war might be avoided (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 70). The media saw the church service in a different light arguing that participants had used the event to fan the flames of disharmony and disunity among the German people (W.

Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 448).

In November "Jewish stores were looted, synagogues were burnt to the ground and almost the entire male Jewish population was sent to concentration camps" (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 457) after a young Jew killed a member of the German ambassador's party in Paris. The persecution of Jews and Jewish Christians in Germany who were blamed for the incident, increased to unprecedented heights (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 457). About 26,000 Jewish youth were sent to concentrations camps in Buchenwald, Dachau and Sachsenhausen. They would not be set free unless they declared themselves willing to leave Germany. Furthermore, the Jewish population was ordered to pay a lump sum of a billion Reichsmark as reparations. Jews' participation in public life was restricted and limited in such a manner that it was impossible for them to live a normal life. By late January 1939, Göring would order the Jews to be either evacuated or forced to leave the country (*Reichskristallnacht* 1). Eberhard Bethge argued that the Confessional Church ceased to be publicly effective after November 9, 1938 (*Bonhoeffer* 70), an assessment that seemed to be confirmed by later accounts of Wilhelm Niemöller even though Dietrich Bonhoeffer in particular had continually tried to remind the members of the Confessional Church of their responsibility toward their Jewish friends.

The Confessional Church was hit hard during this time. Four members of the Provisional Church Leadership faced disciplinary hearings. The Prussian Council of Brothers missed the incarcerated Martin Niemöller's insight and the help of Karl Lücking who was in exile. As a result of the *Reichskristallnacht*, 97 members of the Confessional Church were hindered in the execution of their duties, 11 members were prohibited from leaving the country, 39 members were prohibited from visiting certain cities, 40 members were prohibited from speaking publicly, 48 members were forced to leave their offices, and finally 2 members were expelled (W. Niemöller, *Aus dem Leben eines Bekenntnispfarrers* 240).

Despite these obstacles, the Confessional Church responded to these new outbursts of violence and aggression during their meeting on December 10-12. Participants were called to

follow the directions of scripture and to remember that Jewish Christians were their brothers and sisters. Participants were also reminded that the Gospel was given to all people, including the Jews and that therefore the church should not turn its back to the Jews in their time of need. One result was that the *Bruderrat* of the Old Prussian Union, associated with the Confessional Church, sent a message to all congregations with the request to pray faithfully for the Jewish Christians. Many pastors who called their congregations back under the word of God and who dared to criticize the atrocities committed against the Jews became targets of hostilities themselves. They were attacked and beaten, arrested and sent to regular prisons as well as to concentration camps (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 458-463).

#### THE GERMAN AND CONFESSIONAL CHURCHES IN 1939-1945

The Confessional Church held a synod on January 28, 1939 in Nikolasee, where pastors "declared solidarity" with those pastors who had been trained by the Confessional Church. Since Himmler had shut down their seminaries in the Fall of 1938, those trainees were considered to be "illegals," especially if they actively served as pastors (E. Bethge, Bonhoeffer 133, W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 441).

While some information is still available on the Confessional Church during this time, little has survived about the activities of the Pastors' Emergency Association. According to Wilhelm Niemöller, the organization increasingly spent money to help pastors with their living expenses and legal assistance. Most of the tasks of the Pastors' Emergency Association were by that time laid on Hermine Hermes, the organization's secretary and Dr. Wilhelm Jannasch, the manager. Many of his colleagues, who had helped run the organization, had been conscripted into the army by that time (W. Niemöller, *Der Pfarrernotbund* 142).

In early February the Protestant Church in Thüringen, Eastern Germany, which was composed of very radical German Christians, released new regulations that basically applied the Aryan paragraph to the environment of the church and Jews were completely ostracized from church life. In late February three more Protestant churches applied similar regulations in their regions. Even

though the Confessional Church, according to Wilhelm Niemöller, tried to address the issue of the Aryan-paragraph in the church, it never really made much of an impact. One of the last few times that the church addressed this issue was when members of an organization called *Nationalkirchliche Einigung Deutsche Christen* (National Church Unification German Christians) which had formed a loose cooperation with other Protestant pastors, but not with the Confessional Church, published the Godesberg Declaration in which it affirmed that Christianity and Judaism were mutually exclusive. On April 4, 1939, eleven regional church leaders (*Landeskirchenleiter*) agreed with the the Godesberg Declaration. Furthermore, they agreed to study how to remove Jewish influences from churchlife and establish a church organization that would fight the politizing of religion. The Prussian Council of Brothers, associated closely with the Confessional Church, ordered their response to the Godesberg Declaration to be read in the churches, accusing especially the Thuringian German Christians for radically forcing Confessional Churches to yield to the new theology. The regional councils of brothers (*Landesbruderräte*) pointed out in their declaration that God himself had appointed Israel as his chosen people. Nothing anybody else decided could change that, not even the Jews themselves, no matter how much they had refused in their history to be God's people (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 457-471).

Declarations like those above had almost no impact. In the same month the Protestant church leadership in Prussia, associated with the German Christians, decided that every pastor in their employ had to prove his Aryan heritage. If pastors could not do that, they were dismissed from their duties. But not only non-Aryan pastors, whether Protestant or Confessional, faced hardships during these days. In late March, Dr. Werner, President of the Protestant Church Council of the old Prussian Union, though associated with the Confessional Church, decreed that the appointment of a pastor was merely an administrative act. Congregations had neither rights anymore to refuse a pastor assigned to them based on his beliefs or lifestyle, nor could pastors refuse to serve a congregation they had been assigned to (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 460, 467).



Pastors were not only burdened with restrictions, they were also actively hunted down. Friedrich "Fritz" Müller, pastor in Dahlem, was officially convicted in March of 1939 of major violations of conduct and suspended. One of the things that Müller was lacking, according to accusations, was a proper attitude toward the war. In the written decision, the judges stated that Müller's liturgies lacked for example "the request for victory in battle." Furthermore, the judges argued that the focus on Old Testament theology with an emphasis of God punishing people with war was inappropriate (W. Niemöller, *Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche* 451-452). Müller continued to fight for the needs of the Confessional Church despite his suspension and the fact that he was no longer allowed to preach. He died of a heart attack in September 1942 while serving as a soldier near Leningrad (W. Niemöller, *Lebensbilder aus der Bekennenden Kirche* 80).

Meanwhile the German troops continued their attacks. They invaded Prague in mid-March and Poland in early September after the German government had reached an agreement with Russia. England declared war on Germany on September 3. Whether members of the Confessional Church were still as eager to serve in the military as they were back in 1935 when Hitler issued a new conscription law might be questionable. However, since their patriotism had been doubted severely in the past, it was quite possible that many went to war without second thoughts (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 60-61, 133). Many of them would not return to their families, but die in battle, effectively weakening the Confessional Church which not only lost members that way, but also lost the grip on the churches those pastors had served--another very probable reason why the Confessional Church became more and more a silent church.

Not every pastor died in the war. Wilhelm Niemöller, who was conscripted in late August of 1939, survived the war and returned to his home church in Bielefeld six years later. During his time in the military, he was able to minister to his fellow soldiers, but he could not easily speak officially for the Confessional Church. He was banned from the pulpit in May of 1939. This ban was very hard not only for his home church, but also for his brother's church in Dahlem, Berlin, where he had filled in as occasional pastor ever since Martin Niemöller had been arrested and imprisoned (W. Niemöller, *Aus dem Leben eines Bekenntnispfarrers* 248-273).

The war that began in 1939 continued to gain momentum in 1940 with the invasion of Denmark and Norway in April and the invasion of the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg and France in May. During all this time, the Confessional Church surely tried to be active and effective, but according to Eberhard Bethge and Wilhelm Niemöller only silence came from the Confessional Church during this time.

Occasionally the Confessional Church tried to break the silence, but was not very successful. In October 1940 the ninth Prussian confessional synod met in Leipzig addressing especially the issue of euthanasia without any major resolutions. Everyone seemed to have his own approach. Pastor v. Bodelschwingh continually tried to protect his patients in the mental institutions in Bethel near Bielefeld. Others chose a more direct approach. In a meeting in Hamm, Pastor Ernst Wilm called for active protection and care for the mentally ill. He was arrested in 1942 and sent to the concentration camp in Dachau. Unfortunately, on the whole, the Confessional Church was painfully silent when it came to the issue of euthanasia (W. Niemöller, *Westfälische Kirche im Kampf* 54-55).

In May of 1941, twenty-three committee members of the Confessional Church were arrested and tried in December. In the same month bishop Wurm called for a unification of all Protestant pastors. The final attempt of the Confessional Church occurred on October 16, 1943, in Breslau. The main focus was the Fifth Commandment, cited to protest against the murder of non-Aryans and those people deemed invaluable for society (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 133-135).

Undoubtedly, members of the Confessional Church continued in their own limited ways to make a difference where they served during those last years of the war. But a united front and workable cooperation between different groups was unfortunately no longer possible.

Wilhelm Niemöller describes the toll the war took on the Confessional Church in the province of Westphalia alone. "Fifty pastors, 68 lay pastors, 26 candidates for the pastorate, and 15 theology students died in the line of duty. Sixteen pastors, 18 lay pastors, and one candidate for the pastorate were missing" (W. Niemöller, *Westfälische Kirche im Kampf* 52). The mortal loss of pastors left big gaps in the care of the congregations and hindered the effectiveness

of the Confessional Church. "The frequent air raids and bombings that ruined many churches, the loss of church bells and the loss of a real voice in the press all aided in the weakening and consequent demise of the Confessional Church" (W. Niemöller, *Westfälische Kirche im Kampf* 52). Lutzer points out in his book, *Hitler's Cross*, that "Hitler always used a man's family as an inducement for absolute obedience" (182). Many pastors who would have liked to be more outspoken and more radical felt they had to practice restraint for the sake of their families. (Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross* 182) Despite afflictions and fear, the pastors and members of the Confessional Church tried to do their best in those places where they were. The ways the men served differed greatly.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer became involved in a conspiracy against Hitler because of the close connections with his brother-in-law Hans v. Dohnanyi. Bonhoeffer had an opportunity to escape the war unharmed when he went to New York in June of 1939; yet, his conscience forced him to return to Germany after just one month. From then on his involvement in the conspiracy grew consistently. When the Gestapo made his life miserable again with prohibitions against speaking, and required that he show up at the local police station in regular intervals, his brother-in-law arranged his transfer to Munich with the help of another conspirator, Hans Oster, a colonel in the military defense department. Even during this time, Bonhoeffer never severed his ties with the Confessional Church, but his views were frowned upon by many. Ultimately, the conspiracy was discovered. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans v. Dohnanyi and their wives were arrested on April 5, 1943. The women were soon released, but the men stayed in prison and were joined in October by Bonhoeffer's brother, Klaus, and their friends, Rüdiger Schleicher and Eberhard Bethge, who had tried to help Bonhoeffer and Dohnanyi to break out of prison. On April 9, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other conspirators, including Hans Oster, were hung in the concentration camp of Flossenbürg. Hans von Dohnanyi was very likely killed on the same day in the concentration camp of Sachsenhausen. Klaus Bonhoeffer and Rüdiger Schleicher were killed by an SS commando on April 23, 1945 (E. Bethge, *Bonhoeffer* 88-100, 132-134).

Another valuable member of the Confessional Church, Karl Immer, the author of the

"sunbeam" writings who had fought side-by-side with Martin Niemöller, was responsible during the church war for spreading the word of the Confessional Church by whatever means possible. His resourcefulness to get the decisions of the numerous synods printed and passed out had frustrated his opponents. He was arrested in August 5, 1937, and imprisoned in Berlin. A stroke which he suffered six days later left him physically severely impaired. Despite his physical frailty, he continued to serve the Confessional Church for seven more years until he died in May 1944 (W. Niemöller, *Lebensbilder aus der Bekennenden Kirche* 69-73).

A close friend of Karl Immer was Paul Humburg who served as official leader of the Confessional Church in the Rhineland and then later served as a member of the provisional church government. One of his ministries was to young theology students. His responsibilities included the preparations of their examination according to the beliefs of the Confessional Church. His activities attracted the attention of the Gestapo. Repeated arrests and interrogation weakened him and he was forced to resign from all his offices. Suffering from increasing blindness and the loss of a leg, he died in May 1945 and was buried by the side of his friend, Karl Immer (W. Niemöller, *Lebensbilder aus der Bekennenden Kirche* 54-62).

Once the war was lost, remnants of the Confessional Church issued a declaration at Stuttgart on October 19, 1945, accepting part of the guilt of what had happened in Germany. The Westphalian Church issued the same type of statement for their province on July 20, 1946.

We confess that we as members of the church have sinned against God. The Lord of the church had given us in the church struggle clear insights during the confessional synods. We have often acted against those insights and withdrawn from them. We loved our own security more than we loved our Lord, Jesus Christ. We were all too gullible in the beginning and did not see through the national socialism that made the nation (*Volk*) into an idol. We did not speak up loud enough against the annihilation of the Jews and other condemned people. We resisted less and less against the totalitarian influence so that our view of the living Lord dimmed. We were confused in arrogance, cowardly in love, and weak in faith. We hoped for help from people, instead of help from God: We *reject* to speak of other people's guilt without confessing our own. We *admonish* our brothers and sisters to examine themselves before God for any guilt of their own. (W. Niemöller, *Westphälische Kirche im Kampf* 58-59)



## CONCLUSION

Considering the remarks of the Westphalian Church, it becomes obvious that the Confessional Church did not die after all, but was forced into silence instead. Despite the fact that the church condemned itself for having been silent and ineffective, it cannot be denied that men like Martin Niemöller, Fritz Müller-Dahlem, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and all the others who are less known today gave their best efforts to restore the Protestant church to a purer, more Christ-centered institution.

A great deception, testing and sifting took place in the German Church during the Third Reich. Hitler was very careful at first to hide his real intentions. His early speeches revealed nothing but willingness to cooperate with the churches. His true beliefs about Christianity were revealed slowly in the steps he took quietly to irradicate religion from the life of the German people beginning with the youth by drawing them to *Hitler Jugend* meetings rather than to church, and forbidding religion to be taught in school. This is one reason why the German Christians bought into Hitler's agenda. They hoped for a united German church. Since they could not acheive their goals themselves they relied on the help from the Nazis, who were only too happy to lend assistance, knowing full well that as soon as the church was fragmented into different factions, it would no longer pose a threat to the Nazi's cause.

Christians were tested and the chaff was separated from the wheat. Every Christian had eventually to ask where he/she stood regarding a personal faith in Jesus Christ. Was it the Christ of the Bible or the *Führer* of the German nation? Pastors and church leaders, who were naturally more in the spotlight than the average citizen, had to face particular difficulties. They faced increasing difficulties in taking care of their congregations, including limited resources, restrictions preaching, intimidation, interrogations, prison and suspension. The ability to communicate with like-minded colleagues for encouragement and support was restricted as well, leading to a sense of isolation and weariness. But despite these hardships they tried to preach a pure Gospel.

One question that arises is whether there would have been a rethinking, refocusing on Christ as the center of theology among pastors and churches without something as aggravating as Hitler's national socialism. A second question is what would have happened if men like Niemöller, Müller-



Dahlem, and Bonhoeffer had been less radical. As shown in the paper, it was the Dahlemites, the men around Niemöller and Müller-Dahlem, who constantly reminded the Protestant and Confessional Churches of the declaration of Barmen. A refocusing took place whenever these men sensed that the church was turning in the wrong direction or weakened in its efforts. Bonhoeffer died for his beliefs, beliefs he hammered out during his short life. The impact of his martyrdom cannot be underestimated for the generations of Christians in Germany that followed. Gehard Leipholz once wrote about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his brother-in-law: "He has set a model for a new type of true leadership inspired by the gospel, daily ready for martyrdom and death and imbued by a new spirit of Christian humanism and a creative sense of civic duty" (Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, "Memoirs" 33). Bonhoeffer practiced what he believed, that "he who believes is obedient [ . . . and] that only he who is obedient believes" (Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* 64) and set an example for every Christian to contemplate.

By no means is this to be understood as a condemnation of those men who felt a need to protect their families. Undoubtedly such a decision caused many of them much grief and pain, but not everybody was and is cut out to be a martyr. And fear was ever present for all people not just pastors, but all people. One lady, who witnessed the horrors of the war as a child, shared this little story during an *inpromptu* interview: Her father had been employed in the printshop of Pastor v. Bodelschwingh, the former Reichsbishop, in Bethel near Bielefeld. As laws regarding printed material tightened, there was less and less to print, and also greater fear of possessing prohibited material, especially from the Confessional Church. This lady witnessed that an old man, in his late seventies or early eighties, who lived in the same house, was picked up by the *Gestapo* for interrogation and his place searched for prohibited material from the Confessional Church. Her last comment on the incident was this, "But, of course, you understand, everybody was afraid. You did not talk about it, that was too dangerous. It could get you killed to talk about that" (Klarhorst, Heidi interview).

Martin Niemöller survived prison and concentration camps, but he paid nonetheless a heavy price for his engagement in the church struggle. He was called an enemy of the German people

which bothered him after having been a World War I veteran (Martin Niemöller, *Briefe aus der Gefangenschaft Moabit* 39). While in Sachsenhausen, he spent four years in solitary confinement as "prisoner of the Führer," from which he would be released only to be moved to a concentration camp in Dachau, where he was held until the war was over (Martin Niemöller, *Briefe aus der Gefangenschaft: Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen* 8). Martin Niemöller is intimately linked with the church struggle and many have heard at least his name, but he is only representative of thousands who tried to make a difference and bring the people back to a Christ-centered theology.

One issue where guilt is less pardonable is the fact that many members of the Confessional Church held no strong convictions against the Aryan-paragraph. In this regard they carried considerable guilt which cannot be blotted out by the fact that many tried to help the Jews once it became apparent that the National Socialists indeed planned to annihilate the Jews. And yet who else but the church stood in the way of the Nazis except a few brave individuals like the Scholl siblings, if not the Confessional Church?

In conclusion, it can be said that considering the odds Niemöller, Bonhoeffer and the others faced, they gave their best efforts to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord. Once they understood the implications of the new religion and the idea that Hitler was supposed to be the new savior of the German people, they tried everything they could to help the church refocus on Christ. The Confessional Church, despite its shortcomings and limitations, did valuable work drawing the German people back to Christ, foiling the attempts of the National Socialists and making it difficult for the Nazis and the German Christians to paganize the churches.

## Definitions of Terms

- Church Struggle- the conflict among the different factions within the Protestant Church regarding organization, leadership, and church politics (especially the influence of government in the church)
- Confessional Church - church that resisted the paganization and intrusion of the Protestant Church by the Nazis and the German Christians; main supporters: Martin Niemöller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Immer, Hans Asmussen, and Karl Barth
- Deutsche Christen* - German Christians, supported the Nazi's agenda for the Protestant Church
- Landeskirchen* - regional churches that have a central clerical government in a state
- Pfarrernotbund* - Pastors' Emergency Association, an organization founded by Martin Niemöller to connect and assist pastors in their duties, anti-Nazi and anti-German Christians
- Protestant Church - main religious group in Germany that is often also referred to as Lutheran, and Evangelical, which however differs from what Americans think of when they hear those terms
- Reichsbishop - highest of all German bishops and head of the Protestant Church
- Reichsbruderrat* - Council of Brothers on national level, included members of the Confessional Church as well as other groups, but no German Christians
- Vorläufige Provisorische Leitung* - Provisional Church Leadership, a form of government that included members of various Protestant groups, but no German Christians; a weak organization that tended toward moderation and was weary of the Pastors' Emergency Association

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